

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1764
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AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS
AMEMBASSY LONDON
USMISSION USNATO
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USEEC ALSO FOR EMBASSY
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E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINR PGOV NL
SUBJECT: THE NEW DUTCH GOVERNMENT

REF: THE HAGUE 6286

1. SUMMARY: THE NEW NETHERLANDS GOVERNMENT UNDER
PRIME MINISTER VAN AGT HAS A DIFFERENT POLITICAL BASE
FROM ITS PREDECESSOR. THIS DIFFERENCE WILL BE MOST
NOTICEABLE IN DOMESTIC POLICY, THOUGH THE MARGINS
OF CHANGE ARE NOT WIDE. IN FOREIGN POLICY, WHERE THE
MARGINS ARE NARROWER, THE DIFFERENCE WILL BE MORE
A MATTER OF TONE THAN OF SUBSTANCE. THE DUBIOUS CLAIM
OF THE CDA-LIBERAL COALITION TO THE SUPPORT OF A
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PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITY GIVES IT AN INHERENTLY SHAKY
CLAIM TO LIFE. RELUCTANCE TO PRECIPITATE ANOTHER
CRISIS WILL INHIBIT THE OPPOSITION SOCIALISTS
FROM SEEKING TO BRING THE GOVERNMENT DOWN RIGHT
AWAY, AND THE NEW COALITION COULD LAST A YEAR OR
MORE. MUCH WILL DEPEND ON HOW WELL THE NEW TEAM
WORKS TOGETHER UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF THE NEW PRIME

MINISTER, VAN AGT, WHO HAS A REPUTATION AS A POLITICAL MAVERICK. ABROAD VAN AGT WILL NOT BE STRONG.
END SUMMARY.

2. THE NEW NETHERLANDS GOVERNMENT, HEADED BY PRIME MINISTER VAN AGT, IS COMING INTO OFFICE IN PRECARIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES. THE DIFFICULT AND TORTUOUS FORMATION PROCESS PRODUCED THOROUGHLY BAD FEELINGS BETWEEN THE CDA (CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATS) AND THE PVDA (SOCIALISTS). UNEXPECTEDLY -- AND IN THEIR VIEW UNJUSTLY -- DEPRIVED OF THE SPOILS OF THEIR ELECTION VICTORY AND BACK IN OPPOSITION AFTER FOUR YEARS IN THE SADDLE, THE SOCIALISTS ARE AN ANGRY LOT. THE STAYING POWER OF THE NEW COALITION IS FURTHER SUBJECT TO DOUBT SINCE ONLY 70 OUT OF 150 MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT HAVE GIVEN IT UNCONDITIONAL SUPPORT.

3. HOW LONG THE NEW GOVERNMENT WILL LAST IS SPECULATIVE. FOUR TIMES SINCE WORLD WAR II DUTCH GOVERNMENTS HAVE REMAINED IN OFFICE FOR THE ENTIRE FOUR-YEAR PERIOD. OTHERS HAVE LASTED FOR A FEW YEARS TO A FEW MONTHS. THERE ARE MAJOR REASONS WHY THE VAN AGT GOVERNMENT IS UNLIKELY TO LAST A FULL FOUR YEARS. THE HARD CORE OF ITS PARLIAMENTARY SUPPORT CONSISTS OF THE 28 LIBERALS (VVD) PLUS 42 MEMBERS FROM THE 40-STRONG CDA FOR A TOTAL OF ONLY 70 OUT OF 150.
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SEVEN CDA MEMBERS, REFUSING TO TIE THEMSELVES UNEQUIVOCALLY TO THE GOVERNMENT, HAVE MERELY PROMISED TO JUDGE IT ON ITS MERITS. A FEW SPLINTER PARTIES WILL ALSO SUPPORT THE GOVERNMENT ON MOST ISSUES. THIS GIVES THE NEW GOVERNMENT A MAXIMUM POSSIBLE SUPPORT OF 83 OF 150 SEATS. VAN AGT WILL FACE A POLITICAL GUILLOTINE, DEPENDENT UPON THE WILLINGNESS OF SEVEN MEMBERS OF HIS OWN PARTY FOR CONTINUED SUPPORT.

4. FURTHERMORE, THE GOVERNMENT PROGRAM WAS WORKED OUT IN CONSIDERABLE HURRY IN THE WEEKS JUST PRECEDING GOVERNMENT FORMATION. ITS SCOPE IS ANYTHING BUT COMPREHENSIVE AND ITS TERMS ARE GENERAL. THERE ARE LIKELY TO BE DIFFICULTIES ONCE THE GOVERNMENT GETS DOWN TO THE BRASS TACKS OF SPECIFIC LEGISLATION. THE PARTIES IN THE OPPOSITION, PARTICULARLY THE 53-MEMBER-STRONG SOCIALIST BLOC, WILL BE LOADED FOR BEAR. THE FORMATION PROCESS THROUGH THE SUMMER AND FALL MONTHS GAVE THEM AN ABUNDANCE OF REASONS TO BUILD UP AN INTENSE DISLIKE OF VAN AGT, WHICH IN SOME CASES BORDERS ON THE IRRATIONAL.
FORMER PRIME MINISTER DEN UYL, AN

ACTIVIST BY NATURE, WILL BE TOUGH IN OPPOSITION,
MOTIVATED BY HIS DEEP DISMAY THAT DESPITE HIS
ELECTORAL VICTORY VAN AGT AND NOT HE HAS ENDED UP ON
TOP.

5. NEVERTHELESS, THERE ARE VALID REASONS WHY THE
NEW COALITION ONCE FORMED IS UNLIKELY TO BE OVER-
THROWN SOON. NO ONE, INSIDE OR OUTSIDE THE COALITION,
WANTS TO PLUNGE THE COUNTRY BACK INTO POLITICAL

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TURMOIL. THE MAJOR PARTIES NEED TO REASSESS THEIR
POSITIONS AND TEST THEM IN THE PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS
SCHEDULED FOR SPRING. POLITICAL LEADERS SENSE THAT
ANY MOVE TRIGGERING A NEW POLITICAL CRISIS WOULD SIT
BADLY WITH THE DUTCH PUBLIC. THUS, THE SAME CONSIDERATIONS
WHICH CAUSED THE DEN UYL GOVERNMENT TO STAY TOGETHER
FOR ALMOST FOUR YEARS WILL NOW WORK TO MAINTAIN THE
CDA-VVD COALITION IN POWER. MOREOVER, THE SEVEN CDA
MEMBERS WHO REFUSED TO SUPPORT THE NEW COALITION UNCONDITIONALLY
ARE UNLIKELY TO PRESS THEIR VIEWS TO THE POINT OF BRINGING
IT DOWN AND BREAKING UP THE CDA. CONSEQUENTLY THE

INSTINCT OF POLITICAL SELF-PRESERVATION MAY GIVE THE
NEW COALITION AN INITIAL PERIOD OF GRACE WHICH WOULD EXTEND
BEYOND ONE YEAR AND POSSIBLY LONGER.
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6. THE NEW GOVERNMENT HAS A DIFFERENT POLITICAL BASE
AND A NEW IMAGE. GONE ARE THE SOCILAISTS WHO UNDER
DEN UYL PUT SUCH APPRONOUNCED IMPRINT ON DOMESTIC
AND FOREIGN POLICY. THE GOVERNMENT IS NOW COMPOSED
OF A RECENTLY FORMED CENTER-OF-THE-ROAD COALITION
OF CHRISTIAN PARTIES (CDA), WITH THE MORE CONSERVATIVE
LIBERAL PARTY (VVD) IN THE JUNIOR ROLE. WE WILL BE
WORKING WITH A NEW CAST OF MINISTERS WHO ARE FAVORABLY
DISPOSED TO US BUT UNTRIED AND LARGELY LACKING IN
EXECUTIVE EXPERIENCE. FIVE HAVE NEVER SERVED IN
PARLIAMENT.

7. DIFFERENCES ARE MOST LIKELY IN THE AREA OF DOMESTIC
POLICIES. GONE WILL BE THE EMPHASIS ON THE LEVELING OF
WEALTH, INCOME, KNOWLEDGE AND POWER. THE NEW GOVERNMENT
WILL TIGHTEN THE COUNTRY'S FINANCIAL BELT AT THE EXPENSE
OF SOCIAL PROGRAMS WHICH ENJOYED SUCH PREEMINENCE IN THE DEN
UYL YEARS. THE OBJECTIVE WILL BE CREATION OF A MORE FAVORABLE
CLIMATE FOR BUSINESS DESIGNED TO INCREASE PROFITS AND
INVESTMENT AND TO LEAD TO ECONOMIC GROWTH AND MORE
JOBS. LABOR UNIONS ARE LIKELY TO BE AGGRESSIVE. STRIKES ARE
A DISTINCT POSSIBILITY. THE NEW GOVERNMENT WILL HAVE TO
DEVISE A STRATEGY FOR DEALING WITH THE UNIONS. GIVEN THE
STRIDENT TONE OF UNION LEADERS, THIS WILL BE A TALL ORDER.

8. IN FOREIGN AND DEFENSE POLICY, THE DIFFERENCES ARE MORE
LIKELY TO BE A MATTER OF TONE THAN SUBSTANCE. ALTHOUGH
ISSUES SUCH AS CONTINUED MEMBERSHIP IN NATO, THE DUTCH
ROLE IN THE NORTH-SOUTH DIALOGUE AND DEVELOPMENT AID ARE
GRIST FOR OCCASIONALLY SHARP INTER-PARTX AND PARLIAMENTARY
EXCHANGES, A SUBSTANTIAL CONSENSUS EXISTS. THE DUTCH FULLY
UNDERSTAND THAT THEIR SECURITY AS WELL AS THEIR LIVELIHOOD
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DEPENDS ON THEIR ALLIES AND FRIENDS ABROAD. ANY DUTCH
GOVERNMENT, REGARDLESS OF ITS POLITICAL COLOR, MUST HEED THESE
REALITIES. WE CAN, HOWEVER, EXPECT THE NEW DUTCH
COALITION TO ADOPT A SOMEWHAT MORE POSITIVE TONE ON NATO
AND ENHANCE ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE ALLIANCE DEFENSE
POSTURE. ON ISSUES OF SPECIFIC INTEREST TO US, SUCH AS

HUMAN RIGHTS AND NON-PROLIFERATION, DUTCH POLICY WILL CONTINUE IN STRONG SUPPORT OF US OBJECTIVES, EVEN WHEN OUT AHEAD OF THE NINE. ON OTHER ISSUES, SUCH AS SOUTHERN AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST, THE DUTCH WILL STAY WITHIN THE NINE.

9. HOW SKILLFULLY NEW PRIME MINISTER VAN AGT MANAGES THE COALITION WILL HAVE CONSIDERABLE INFLUENCE ON ITS EFFECTIVENESS AS WELL AS ITS DURATION. THE TEAM IS NEW AND WILL NEED TIME TO GET USED TO EACH OTHER. VAN AGT'S ROLE AS LEADER, COORDINATOR AND BROKER WILL BE CRUCIAL. HIS PERIOD AS CDA LEADER HAS SHOWN HIM TO BE A MAN PRONE TO OPERATE ON HIS OWN, SEEMINGLY BLITHELY UNMINDFUL OF THE VIEWS OF HIS POLITICAL SUPPORTERS, AND EVEN THE LEADERSHIP OF HIS PARTY. HIS MAVERICK, UNORTHODOX WAYS HAVE ON OCCASION CAUSED CONSTERNATION AND DISMAY AMONG PARTY FAITHFUL. HIS SUPPORTERS DESCRIBE VAN AGT'S BEHAVIOR AS THAT OF AN AGILE AND ADROIT POLITICIAN AND POINT TO HIS POLITICAL SUCCESS. MOST VAN AGT WATCHERS, HOWEVER, REGARD HIM AS AN UNPREDICTABLE PERSON WITH AN UNCOMMON CAPACITY FOR INEPTNESS. SINCE VAN AGT AS PRIME MINISTER IS

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UNLIKELY TO OPERATE DIFFERENTLY, DIFFICULTIES WITHIN THE CABINET AND IN HIS RELATIONS WITH PARLIAMENT SEEM INEVITABLE. HOWEVER, IF VAN AGT PLAYS THE ROLE OF PRIME MINISTER IN A LOW KEY, GIVING HIS CABINET ASSOCIATES PLENTY OF SCOPE, HE COULD SETTLE SMOOTHLY INTO HIS NEW ROLE. POSSIBLY THE SOMEWHAT FORMAL, EVEN CONTEMPLATIVE, IMAGE HE PROJECTS WILL BE WELCOMED BY POLITICIANS AND A PUBLIC EXHAUSTED BY THE FRENZY OF DEN UYL'S STYLE. IF SO, THE COALITION MAY REVEAL CONSIDERABLE STRENGTH, DURABILITY AND, QUITE POSSIBLY, ELECTORAL APPEAL.

10. EVEN IF THE NEW GOVERNMENT SUCCEEDS IN PUTTING ITSELF ACROSS FAVORABLY WITH THE DUTCH ELECTORATE, IT WILL NOT MAKE A STRONG IMPRESSION IN EUROPE. THOUGH VAN AGT HAS BEEN A DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER FOR FOUR YEARS, HE IS A NEWCOMER ON THE CONFIDENTIAL

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INTERNATIONAL SCENE. LIKE MANY DUTCH OF HIS BACKGROUND HE HAS DONE SOME FOREIGN TRAVELING, INCLUDING AN OFFICIAL TRIP TO THE UNITED STATES IN 1975, BUT HE IS ESSENTIALLY ALIEN TO FOREIGN AFFAIRS. TO A LARGE EXTENT HE WILL HAVE TO DEPEND ON FOREIGN MINISTER VAN DER KLAUW. THE LATTER, AN ABLE PROFESSIONAL DIPLOMAT WITH A FIRST CLASS REPUTATION, HAS NO POLITICAL STATURE. HE HAS, HOWEVER, A WIDE RANGE OF DIPLOMATIC CONTACTS, PARTICULARLY FROM HIS RECENT SERVICE IN NEW YORK AND GENEVA, AND WILL NO DOUBT DRAW ON THESE TO GOOD ADVANTAGE. THE FACT THAT UNDER THE DUTCH CONSTITUTIONAL SYSTEM EXCLUSIVE RESPONSIBILITY FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS RESTS WITH THE FOREIGN MINISTER -- AND NOT THE PRIME MINISTER -- WILL ALSO HELP VAN DER KLAUW TO ESTABLISH A FOOTHOLD. BUT EVEN UNDER THE BEST CIRCUMSTANCES, IT WILL BE AN UPHILL STRUGGLE FOR THE VAN AGT - VAN DER KLAUW COMBINATION TO BECOME A VOICE THAT COUNTS AND ENJOYS RESPECT IN THOSE SOPHISTICATED INTERNATIONAL CIRCLES ACCUSTOMED TO THE SKILLS OF DEN UYL AND VAN DER STOEL.

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